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ABSTRACT

This evaluation of writing in the West Hartford CT Public Schools was part of a large evaluation of English/Language Arts. To provide information for program improvement and growth, the evaluation focused on six issues: (1) the extent of implementation of West Hartford's Composition Program; (2) how teachers use the Composition Program in their classrooms; (3) teachers' concerns about program implementation; (4) the extent of improvement in students' writing achievement from grade three to grade twelve; (5) identification of writing strengths and weaknesses within representative grades; and (6) how the writing achievement of West Hartford's 17 year-olds compares to that of advantaged, urban, 17 year-olds nationally. Data were collected through (1) teacher questionnaires and structured interviews; (2) representative samples of student compositions written by all students in grades three, five, seven, nine and twelve on the same topic; (3) best pieces of writing submitted by representative student samples from grades four, eight, and twelve; and (4) persuasive essays by all twelfth grade students on a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment topic. Results indicated West Hartford Students of all ability levels were learning to write effectively. Data analyses will be used in staff seminars to examine individual and group instructional practices. (BS)

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AN EVALUATION OF STUDENT WRITING

Edward F. Reidy, Jr.
Spring, 1982

PURPOSE

The evaluation of writing in the West Hartford Public Schools is one part of a larger evaluation of English/Language Arts. Its purpose and that of the larger study is to provide information for program improvement and growth so that our students will become increasingly more adept in their use of language.

QUESTIONS OF INTEREST[1]

This evaluation of writing has focused on the following six questions.

1. To what extent has West Hartford's Composition Program been implemented in the schools?
2. How do teachers use the Composition Program in their classrooms?
3. What concerns do teachers have about implementing the Composition Program?
4. To what extent does the writing achievement of West Hartford students improve from grade three to grade twelve?
5. What is the pattern of writing strengths and weaknesses within representative grades?
6. How does the writing of West Hartford's seventeen-year-olds compare to that of seventeen-year-olds from advantaged urban communities across the country?

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[1] A seventh question, which focused on student writing in content area classes, was included in our design for this evaluation, but has not yet been addressed.

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PROCEDURES and FINDINGS

The rest of this paper is organized by question or set of questions. Following the statement of question(s), we provide a description of the procedures used to answer the question(s) and the answers we have found.

A. *To what extent has West Hartford's Composition Program been implemented in our schools?*

How do teachers use the Composition Program in their classrooms?

What concerns do teachers have about the program?

To answer this set of questions we gathered data from all secondary teachers of English and from a sample of forty elementary teachers from each of grades three, four, five and six. In gathering this data we used a questionnaire on teacher composition practices and a focused interview which addressed how teachers taught composition in given classes. A copy of the questionnaire and of the interview questions is attached.

Each of the teachers interviewed received the questionnaire and a letter informing her or him who would conduct the interview and which particular class the interviewer would ask about. At the secondary level classes were selected so as to gain information on writing activities in modified, standard and advanced level English courses. To insure that nearly all questionnaires would be returned, teachers were asked to bring their completed questionnaires to the interview session. Secondary principals, department heads and central office staff interviewed the elementary teachers. Elementary principals and central office staff interviewed the English teachers.

Before starting, the interviewer asked the teacher's permission to tape the interview. Seventy-five percent of the teachers consented to this arrangement. Analyses of the content of the interview notes and tapes, as well as frequency analyses of responses to the questionnaires, provided the data for addressing the above three questions.

Content analysis of the interview notes and tapes permits the following seven generalizations:

1. Teachers are confident about their teaching strategies, but many would like to know more about the approaches of their colleagues.

2. The components of our writing program identified most frequently include the use of student writing folders, the relatively consistent practice of conferencing during or after students write, the frequent use of DLAS data, the frequent use of the curriculum guide at the elementary level and the sporadic use of the curriculum guide at the secondary level.

3. Elementary and secondary teachers take different approaches to teaching writing. While both groups of teachers emphasize writing a first draft, revising and rewriting, elementary teachers interviewed talk about poems and stories and journals, about self-expression and about doing lots and lots of writing. Secondary teachers talk about thesis sentences, about using support from literature, about grammar, about complete sentences.

4. Topics for writing at the secondary level are usually assigned by the teacher. Literary analysis and expository writing are the major assignments. Elementary teachers use a variety of assignments, many of which grow out of studies across the curriculum.

5. The teacher is the primary audience for student writing.

6. The necessity of preparing students for college writing strongly influences teaching practices at the secondary level.

7. Lack of time is perceived as a problem by most teachers. Furthermore, the percentage of time devoted to grammar, literature, composition, reading, speaking and listening is inconsistent from teacher to teacher.

From the Teacher Practices Questionnaire we learned that when analyzing students' papers, teachers are quite likely to write comments throughout referring to specific aspects of the paper, try to balance positive and negative comments, comment on lapses in logic or organization and suggest ways to improve style. When teaching writing, teachers are quite likely to have students engage in prewriting activities, submit first drafts for comments or grading and revise their writing.

Based on the interview and questionnaire data highlighted above, we conclude that West Hartford's Composition Program has been implemented in our schools to the extent that prewriting activities, drafting and revising are common components of teachers' instructional practices in teaching writing. Furthermore, the relatively consistent practice of conferencing during or after students write suggests one of the key elements of the writing process approach is extensively implemented. On the other hand, implementation is not even and consistent across all classrooms, especially in terms of the allocation of instructional time.

Variation in teacher use of the program is most evident when we compare instructional practices at the elementary level to those at the secondary level. As indicated in generalizations 2, 3 and 4 on page 3, differences between the two levels are most pronounced in terms of use of the curriculum guide and in the types of student writing assignments.

Teachers' major concerns revolve about the amount of time needed to teach writing effectively. Time for students to write and to revise, time for teachers to respond to student writing, to share ideas with colleagues and to learn more about recent developments in the teaching of writing --- all these are teacher concerns.

B. *To what extent does the writing of West Hartford students improve from grade three to grade twelve?*

What is the pattern of writing strengths and weaknesses within representative grades?

To answer these questions we administered the writing topic shown in Figure 1 to all students in grades 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11. Standard instructions were used for the administration in all grades. Students had thirty-five minutes to write their first draft. Papers were then collected and returned a day later when students were given another thirty-five minutes to revise and write their final draft.

Using the rating scale shown in Figure 2, a team of teachers rated a representative sample of papers, which consisted of 150 papers from each of the five grades. Papers were rated in two ways: holistically and analytically. The holistic method called for the rater to form an overall impression of the quality of the total paper, or of some general trait. The analytic method required consideration of the various individual qualities that made up one general trait. For example, an analytic rating of the (Continued-Page 7)

FIGURE 1

Here is a picture of a woman with some tomatoes. Look at the picture for a while and think about what is going on. When you have decided, write a story that tells what is happening in the picture and what is likely to happen next.

FIGURE 2

Composition Rating Scale

I. ORGANIZATION

A. Sequence

1. Is there a direction to the narrative: beginning, middle, ending?
2. Are the paragraphs (or groups of sentences, if paragraphing is missing) placed in natural and logical sequence within the whole?
3. Are sentences in a natural and logical sequence within the paragraphs (or groups of sentences)?
4. Are transitions between sentences and between paragraphs adequate and appropriate?

B. Paragraphing - Is paragraphing present and used accurately?

C. Development - Does the narrative use details, examples or evidence to support generalizations?

II. MECHANICS

A. Spelling - Is the spelling generally correct?

B. Punctuation - Is conventional punctuation followed?

C. Usage

1. Are the sentences free of faulty parallel structure, mixed constructions, dangling modifiers, and errors of subject-verb agreement and verb tense?
2. Is the narrative free of sentence fragments and run-on sentences?

III. STYLE

A. Sentence Structure - Is a variety of sentence structure used appropriately?

B. Speakers' Voice (Tone) - Is a distinct and consistent attitude (point of view) toward the subject and audience reflected in the narrative?

C. Development - Are descriptions and ideas sufficiently developed through the use of details, dialogue and examples?

IV. LANGUAGE (Choice of Words)

A. Variety - Is the vocabulary sufficiently varied?

B. Appropriateness (diction) - Is the level of vocabulary appropriate in the context?

C. Specifics - Are specific words and details effectively used?

general trait of mechanics would include specific ratings on spelling, punctuation and sentence usage, as well as an overall rating of mechanics based on the analysis of subtraits. A holistic rating of the general trait of mechanics, on the other hand, would include only one overall rating of mechanics based on a general impression of spelling, mechanics and sentence usage.

Following a training session, five teams of two teachers each rated the final draft of all 750 papers in the sample. Each of the four analytic teams confined itself to one trait and its subtraits. The fifth team holistically rated the total paper and the four general traits of organization, mechanics, style and language.

In order to determine whether the writing performance of students does improve as they progress through the grades, the same criterion had to be applied to all papers. That criterion was an excellent paper written by an eleventh grade student. The compositions had all identification removed from them and were randomly ordered to remove any trace of grade order. The readers knew only that eacn paper was written by a 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th or 11th grader, but were to assume it had been written by an eleventh grade student and rate it accordingly.

In addition to rating the above mentioned papers we also drew a representative sample of 150 students from each of grades 4, 8 and 12. We then asked each of these students, with the help of their teacher, to select their best piece of writing from their writing folder and submit it to us. Using procedures similar to those already described, a team of two teachers holistically rated these papers. The team holistically rated the total paper and the four general traits of organization, mechanics, style and language.

All ratings were converted to standard scores for purposes of analysis. These scores have a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10. While these scores have little absolute interpretative value, they allow us to compare performance across grades and across writing traits and subtraits.

Tables 1 - 4 highlight the rating results for both the grade 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11 sample, also called the Tomato Lady sample, and the grade 4, 8 and 12 sample, also called the best paper sample.

TABLE 1

The Tomato Lady Sample

Standard Score Means by Grade

for the

General Impression and Analytic Trait Ratings

	GRADE				
TRAIT	3	5	7	9	11
Organization	38.9	47.5	50.4	54.4	58.0
Mechanics	42.1	45.4	50.2	53.2	58.2
Style	39.7	45.4	49.7	54.9	59.7
Language	39.2	46.0	50.8	53.6	59.9
General Impression	39.4	46.0	50.6	54.3	58.9

TABLE 2

The Best Paper Sample

Standard Score Means by Grade

for the

General Impression and Trait Ratings

	GRADE		
TRAIT	4	8	12
Organization	44.3	50.1	56.9
Mechanics	44.3	50.2	57.0
Style	44.4	48.8	58.7
Language	44.1	49.3	58.5
General Impression	43.2	49.8	58.7

TABLE 3

The Tomato Lady Sample

Standard Score Means by Grade by Ability Group
for the
General Impression Rating

	GRADE				
Ability Group	3	5	7	9	11
Below Average	37.2	42.4	46.2	49.4	56.0
Average	38.6	47.7	50.6	52.3	59.7
Above Average	42.5	48.8	55.1	59.7	62.0

TABLE 4

The Best Paper Sample

Standard Score Means by Grade by Ability Group
for the
General Impression Rating

	GRADE		
Ability Group	4	8	12
Below Average	41.4	45.5	51.6
Average	42.9	49.2	57.9
Above Average	45.3	54.8	66.6

An examination of Table 1 shows significant growth between all adjacant grades from 3 to 11 for all four traits and for the general impression or total paper rating. Twenty-four of the twenty-five ratings given these papers produce patterns of significant between grade growth similar to that shown in Table 1. For the subtrait rating, "use of paragraphs," significant growth is not evident between grades 5 and 7, 7 and 9, and 9 and 11.

Table 2 shows the patterns of significant between grade growth for all ratings given the best paper sample. Tables 3 and 4 show that this pattern of significant growth, as students progress through the grades, holds up for below average, average and above average ability groups.

Clearly, whether we look at student writing produced in response to a particular topic or at samples of students' best writing, we come to the same conclusion. Student writing does improve significantly and consistently from grade to grade. That improvement is evident on a variety of writing traits and subtraits.

With regard to within grade patterns of strengths and weaknesses, our analyses provide much less definitive information. While mechanics tend to be a strength at grade 3, organization at grade 5, and style and language at grade 11, no clear strengths or weaknesses among traits are evident at grades 4, 7, 8, 9 or 12.

Another way of addressing the issue of growth in writing skills is through the use of indirect measures of writing such as the spelling and language subtests of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the language mechanics subtest of West Hartford's Diagnostic Language Arts Test (DLAS). While these tests do not measure students' ability to produce prose, they do measure editing and proofing skills which are useful in the revision process.

Successively higher levels of these tests assess successively more difficult aspects of language mechanics, language expression and spelling. Thus, it can be argued that scoring consistently high on these tests in all grades tested is evidence that students are growing in their command of these aspects of language use.

In October 1981, West Hartford's CTBS mean percentile ranks in spelling for grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 were 63, 63, 67 and 70, respectively; in October, 1982, the scores were 72, 66, 72 and 72, respectively. For total language, which reflects both language mechanics and language expression, the 1981 scores for these same four grades were 68, 70, 71 and 73, respectively; the 1982 scores were 78, 76, 75 and 75, respectively.

In February, 1982 the mean percentage of items correct on the DLAS language mechanics subtest were as follows:

Grade	Mean % Correct
3	76
4	77
5	73
6	70
7	56
8	70

Interpretation of the DLAS data is complicated by the fact that not all students in a given grade take the same test level. Nonetheless, the DLAS data considered together with the CTBS data provide further evidence that our students are learning the language skills in our curriculum and are becoming increasingly more adept in their use of language as they progress through the grades.

C. *How does the writing of West Hartford's seventeen-year-olds compare to that of seventeen-year-olds from advantaged urban communities across the country?*

To answer this question we had to find a topic used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in its most recent nationwide assessment of writing. By using a NAEP topic with students in West Hartford we were able to compare the performance of our students to that of students from similar communities across the country.

In June, 1982, we asked all twelfth grade students in West Hartford to complete the following persuasive task:

> Some high school students have proposed converting an old house into a recreation center where young people might drop in evenings for talk and relaxation. Some local residents oppose the plan on the grounds that the center would depress property values in the neighborhood and attract undesirable types. A public hearing has been called. Write a brief speech that you would make supporting or opposing the plan. Remember to take only ONE point of view. Organize your arguments carefully and be as convincing as possible. Space is provided below and on the next three pages.

There are many means by which the writers might attempt to sway this audience. They could appeal to general truths, to experience or to social values. They could marshall evidence about other such centers in an effort to be scientific, or they could attempt to appeal to the sympathies of the audience and the fact that they were once teenagers themselves. Good writers will recognize the need to anticipate and diffuse objections--in other words, they will attend to both sides of the issue, but state a clear preference for their view. Accordingly, the scoring guide was as follows:

1 =*Do not define and defend a point of view.* Some of these papers have not explicitly or implicitly taken a position. Others may contain a thesis statement or clearly imply a position but do not give supporting reasons to develop their arguments.

2 =*Define a point of view and offer minimal defense.* These papers explicitly state or strongly imply a position and give one or more clusters of arguments or appeals, but they do not develop a line of argument or link the clusters to each other.

3 =*Define and defend a point of view.* These papers clearly state or imply a position and present at least one substantially developed line of argument or two moderately developed lines of argument relevant to the issues at hand.

4 =*Systematically define and defend a point of view.* These papers present at least two moderately developed lines of argument, one which supports the position and one which answers the possible arguments raised by the opposition. The lines of argument usually will be linked as well as carefully organized. (NAEP, 1980)

Using the above scoring guide, which is more fully explained in materials provided by NAEP, two teachers rated a representative sample of 150 twelfth grade papers. Table 5 shows the results of the West Hartford ratings as compared to the ratings provided by NAEP from their 1979 assessment of writing.

TABLE 5

"REC CENTER" EXERCISE

Percentages of Students at Each Score Level

Score Level	Advantaged Urban Communities (NAEP Assessment)	West Hartford
Not Persuasive (1)	21.3	19.3
Minimally Persuasive (2)	56.8	32.6
Persuasive (3)	19.7	36.0
Fully Persuasive (4)	2.3	12.0
Competent or Better (3 and 4)	22.0	48.0

Clearly, the writing of West Hartford's twelfth graders compares quite favorably with that of students from similar communities across the country. Nearly half of our students wrote papers rated competent or better, as compared to about a fifth of students residing in advantaged urban communities participating in the NAEP study. Of some concern, however, is the finding that in both the NAEP and the West Hartford studies about a fifth of the students did not write even minimally persuasive papers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

West Hartford students of all ability levels are learning to write. Our teachers are doing a commendable job of teaching writing.

There is an immediate need to address the lack of adequate growth in "use of paragraphs". Our teachers are aware of this need as a result of information provided them this Fall and they are focusing on this skill in their classes. Our English department heads have been addressing this need in their conferences with staff and in their review of student writing folders.

There is both a need and a desire for much more discussion among teachers, particularly at the secondary level, about current teaching practices, sequencing instruction and recent developments in the teaching of writing. To facilitate such discussion, a group consisting of the English department heads, two English teachers from each high school, one English teacher from each middle school and the coordinator of research will serve as an organizing committee for a series of staff seminars to be held during scheduled department meetings this Spring. The group will spend a day reviewing the many data analyses already completed and organizing those analyses to serve as the basis for a series of staff seminars which will provide the opportunity for re-examining individual and group instructional practices.

Recent efforts at sharing school level findings with elementary school teachers has shown that school level reports are a useful vehicle for stimulating discussions on teaching practices as well as for pinpointing problems. Accordingly, the coordinator of research will make such reports to all elementary schools by year's end.

This evaluation of our composition program has provided "good news" on the writing achievement of our students. It has also provided us with considerable data which can serve a valuable role in helping us reach anew for excellence in our teaching. While our data collection is complete, the important and potentially fruitful task of discerning the implications of these data for practice has just begun.

ATTACHMENT # 1

1982 WRITING ASSESSMENT

Interview Questions

1. Kindly describe how you teach writing in your_____class.

   (Use checklist as teacher speaks. Ask following questions to complete checklist.)

2. As you look back over the last few months, what do you see as the major strengths of your approach to teaching writing with this particular class?

3. Are there any things you might do differently if you were to teach a similar class next year?

4. Based on your experience, how do you think we could improve student writing and the teaching of writing in West Hartford?

ATTACHMENT # 2

WEST HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

West Hartford, Connecticut

COMPOSITION PRACTICES INVENTORY

Please respond to the following questions in terms of your _____ class.

1. When you mark papers written by students in this class, how likely are you to: (Circle appropriate number.)

	Not at all likely				Very likely
a. write only general comments, either at the beginning or end of the paper	1	2	3	4	5
b. write comments throughout referring to specific aspects of the paper	1	2	3	4	5
c. rewrite parts of student papers to show them how they might have written a phrase, sentence or paragraph more effectively	1	2	3	4	5
d. try to balance positive and negative comments on each student's writing	1	2	3	4	5
e. limit comments primarily to what the student has done well	1	2	3	4	5
f. limit comments primarily to the errors or problems in student's writing	1	2	3	4	5
g. indicate mechanical errors (spelling, grammar) and correct them	1	2	3	4	5
h. indicate mechanical errors without correcting them	1	2	3	4	5
i. comment on lapses in logic or organization	1	2	3	4	5
j. suggest ways to improve the style of writing	1	2	3	4	5
k. assign a single grade representing a combined evaluation of content and form (mechanics or usage)	1	2	3	4	5
l. assign a split grade: one for content, one for form	1	2	3	4	5

2. How often do you use any of the following teaching techniques with this class? (Circle appropriate number.)

	Never				Always
a. students work together in small groups to help each other with writing	1	2	3	4	5
b. students evaluate each others' writing	1	2	3	4	5
c. students engage in pre-writing activities	1	2	3	4	5
d. students are required to revise their writing	1	2	3	4	5
e. students submit first drafts for comments or grading	1	2	3	4	5
f. students write assignments in class (other than exams)	1	2	3	4	5
g. examples of student writing are discussed in class	1	2	3	4	5

3. Based on your experience this semester, how much of a problem is each of the following for students in this class? (Circle appropriate number.)

	Not a Problem				A Major Problem
a. selecting a topic	1	2	3	4	5
b. doing research and taking notes	1	2	3	4	5
c. thinking through their ideas before writing	1	2	3	4	5
d. actually sitting down to write	1	2	3	4	5
e. deciding who is the audience	1	2	3	4	5
f. using correct grammar and punctuation	1	2	3	4	5
g. spelling	1	2	3	4	5
h. editing and rewriting drafts	1	2	3	4	5
i. style and originality	1	2	3	4	5
j. logic and organization	1	2	3	4	5
k. getting papers in on time	1	2	3	4	5